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Death behind the lines

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The military is under fire from families who want answers over its treatment of their loved ones, writes Geoff Strong.

It isn't so much that John Satatas is dead. He was a soldier, after all, and his family knows that preparedness to die is part of the job description. His parents, Rosa and George Satatas, are also aware racism is sometimes part of the price of a migrant success story in this, their adopted country.

Despite it, they are fiercely patriotic towards Australia. Had their eldest son died fighting to defend it, there would have been tears and pride, but no recriminations.

Instead, a year ago next week, the body of John Satatas was found with a rope around his neck barely 50metres from the accommodation block where he lived at Holsworthy army barracks, west of Sydney. He had been missing three days.

When found, he had the words "Spic" and "Spiros" inscribed on his face in what appeared to be felt-tip pen. The outline of a beard and moustache was also drawn on his face. Unofficially, his death was said to be suicide, but the army has yet to release findings from its internal board of inquiry. (Questioned by *The Age* this week, the army said the report would be released to the family "shortly".)

Many of his fellow soldiers who made witness statements to police claimed John had been drinking heavily. They all remembered the drink was Wild Turkey whisky and could quote him as saying something like: "If you want me, I'll be out the back hanging from a tree."

Curiously, a forensic report to the New South Wales coroner found at most a mild quantity of blood alcohol. The report also speculates that his death could have been due to strangulation rather than hanging. But the doctor who performed the forensic examination was unable to find anything to suggest death was not self-inflicted.

His family, though, suspect all might not be as it seems. John's army friends, who used to spend leave time with the Satatas family at their home in Oakleigh, are no longer in



Rosa Satatas at home with a memento of her son.
Picture: Cathryn Tremain

touch. But Rosa Satatas remembers asking two of John's closest mates the circumstances of his death at his funeral.

She remembers they seemed to parrot the same phrases, insisting it was suicide and that he hated the army. "But there was something about them; they would not make eye contact," she says.

"They had been close to us, but when they said these things they would not look me in the eye."

The story of John Satatas is one of a number of tragedies to come before the current Senate inquiry into Australia's system of military justice. The inquiry, due to report in August, is investigating the effectiveness of the military's own justice system and assessing whether it is impartial, fair and accountable. The inquiry was prompted by public concerns over peacetime deaths in the military and claims that some of these had been caused by mistreatment of service personnel, particularly during training.

Only 44 submissions have so far been made public, and not all are about accidental deaths and suicide. But there is a common thread to complaints: that the defence forces' response to a member being killed in an accident, committing suicide or suffering a breakdown because of stress is often less than adequate and sometimes downright harmful.

Families criticise a machismo culture that they believe fails to care for some troubled young people for whom the service is, effectively, in loco parentis. They also resent the fact that the military's own legal processes are neither open nor transparent to them, which raises questions of conflict of interest. Is the military the best organisation to investigate potential wrongdoing by its own?

Many submissions argue that this time-honoured tradition has to end, and that peacetime military deaths and allegations of abuse should be handled by an independent body. A handful of countries overseas, most notably Canada, have already taken this step. But the chief of the Australian Defence Force, General Peter Cosgrove, is blunt in his support of the current system.

In his submission, he says: "The Defence Force must be prepared to fight and win when called upon by the government. To ensure the ADF remains an effective force able to fulfil its obligations, it is essential it retains effective command at all levels. The military justice system supports the command function while protecting the rights of the individual."

One of the cases that prompted the inquiry was that of Private Jeremy Williams. He killed himself last year after what a board of inquiry found was prolonged abuse and intimidation from more senior ranks at the Singleton Infantry School in the Hunter Valley, north of Sydney. The result of that inquiry has been prosecutions, transfers and disciplining of senior staff at that school, as well as changes to army training policy.

In its inquiry findings, the army admitted Williams was a friendly, outgoing trainee. His main weakness was a tendency to drink too much.

In January last year, he injured a leg during training but was worried about needing hospital treatment for fear of being seen as a failure. While on leave he began drinking heavily, and on returning to barracks had an argument with a colleague. The next morning, February 3, he was found hanging from a nearby tree.

Williams's parents' submission to the Senate inquiry claimed that at the school there were threats of beatings and violence by non-commissioned officers, psychological punishment - isolating soldiers from their peers, including solitary confinement without charge - and unrestrained use of foul and humiliating language. The family also alleges a psychological report on their son was altered by a senior officer.

Adelaide woman Debra Knight, whose son Jason Guttridge committed suicide while stationed at Townsville in 1997, believes the military is isolated from the cultural and social changes that have transformed Australia and other Western societies in recent decades: "Children are brought up in a society which encourages independent thought and questioning. We are told we have to be clever to make our way in the world. That is the culture we live in.

"But the way of the army is the reverse. You take orders, no matter how stupid, without question. You are yelled and screamed at and abused. You are made to feel stupid and worthless if you don't do exactly what they want. The army methods represent a society that doesn't exist any more."

In countries with a British tradition, military justice and its methods of discipline go back to the first permanent British army, established by Oliver Cromwell in the 17th century.

For Neil James, who heads the Australia Defence Association lobby group, the problem is not that the military has moved away from society; it is that society has moved away from the military. "We currently have no member of the High Court who has had military experience, nor do I think is there anyone in the upper levels of the state judiciary," he told *The Age*. "Immediately after World War II, there were a number of High Court judges who had served in the military and were familiar with its system of justice."

On the question of whether military discipline is out of step with social expectations, he says: "Do you want the country defended by an armed forces or a rabble?"

In its submission to the inquiry, the association argues strongly to retain and enhance the present system:

"It should be noted that the Australian

Defence Forces will always have to retain the authority and ability to conduct such inquiries when forces are committed on overseas operations.

"It therefore makes little sense to exclude the ADF from doing so in Australia in peacetime ... because the defence force often has the only current expertise in the professional or technical matter involved, such as warship, tank or jet fighter manoeuvres."

The military is virtually unique among legal occupations in that its members have

ultimately to be prepared to kill or be killed. But in the quiet decades following Vietnam, people joined up looking for relatively secure employment. It was even sold as a means of getting a trade qualification or university degree before going on to a civilian career. Tank mechanics could later transfer their skills to Mack trucks, F-111 pilots could go on to fly Qantas 747s, and the discipline would make any transfer to civvy street a walk in the park.

The chances of active duty have increased of late, though, beginning with Australia's intervention in East Timor and extending to the operations in the Solomon Islands and Iraq.

John Satatas was not frightened at the prospect of such a posting. On Christmas Day the year before his death, he told his cousin Charles Bodas that he had little fear of being posted to just such an overseas hotspot.

Bodas recalled him saying: "That's exactly what we've been training for ... it would be good to put it all into action and test ourselves out. That's my job now. I wouldn't mind being posted overseas."

In the year since his death, the family says it has been faced with inconsistent information and rebuffs from the army. Stated deadlines for the internal inquiry have passed, and still no explanation has been given. Even attempts by the Federal Opposition's shadow defence minister, Senator Chris Evans, to get an answer have been unsuccessful.

Rosa Satatas works as a housekeeper. She has an excellent understanding of English but speaks with a pronounced accent. She thinks the military patronises her family because of their migrant background. She came from Portugal and her husband from Greece, but they met and married in Australia.

Their home in Oakleigh is a typical 1970s-era brick bungalow with a curved iron fence. Inside, the furnishings, with crystal candle holders and heavy red drapes, point to Rosa's Portuguese homeland. Mementos of parental pride complete the picture of modest success, but their experience with the army makes her question the veneer of comfort Australia offers.

"If this can happen to someone of Mediterranean European descent, what must it be like for an Aboriginal or (someone who is) ethnically Asian, not to mention a Muslim wanting to join the armed forces?" she asks.

Madonna Palmer believes she has some insight into that question. She believes entrenched military racism led to the death of her son, Damien.

He was 19 when he committed suicide at Laverack barracks in Townsville in 1999. He was Aboriginal and had been encouraged to join the army through the Federal Government's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Recruitment and Career Development Strategy.

While there might have been an official policy to welcome Aborigines in the forces, it did not appear to translate to the attitude of all the personnel involved in their training.

Palmer, who lives in Brisbane, says her son had been keen to be a soldier and follow his father, who served in East Timor for the air force. But she recalls Damien was devastated during training to be called to the front of his group and told he was only there because he was black.

"And he was told that he would be receiving no government handouts and not to expect any special treatment. The overtones were not lost on Damien or any other recruits who were there.

"Bastardisation is something the military is well aware of. They are also supposed to know of problems that Aborigines face and this is highlighted in a training video shown to recruiters highlighting problems with alcohol, family and suicide," Palmer says.

But how deep does the military's understanding of psychological problems go? Matthew Liddell hanged himself in the wardrobe of a Brisbane psychiatric hospital in November last year. His mother Dulcie, who lives in Brisbane, said he had never been able to get over the trauma of being injured and seeing close friends killed in the engine room explosion of the naval ship *Westralia* in 1998.

She says that after two weeks in hospital with shock, burns and smoke inhalation, the navy sent him back to the ship despite a promise that no one would be forced to do so. "He did not want to return to the ship, which held so many tragic memories, and by Christmas that year was in hospital with severe depression," she says.

She says that after release he was transferred to shore duties at HMAS *Stirling* in Perth, but every day he could see the ship moored at the dock. It took 16 to 17 months before an assessment team decided he was eligible for post-traumatic stress disorder treatment. He was discharged in 2000 with a 20per cent disability pension but had been unable to hold down a job.

His mother says he was an intelligent young man and a caring and loving son who wanted a career as a navy clearance diver. "In the end, he was a lost soul floundering in heavy seas, not knowing where the wind would take him."

Liddell says her son was tortured by the memory of his friend, Bradley Meek, killed on the *Westralia*. "He could not erase the memory of Bradley's skin that came off onto him when he was trying to revive him but didn't realise he was already dead.

"He had a recurring dream where the skin was all over him and he saw Bradley's staring eyes. Have you ever seen a human being cry from his heart and soul without making a sound?"

The family of Corporal Jason Sturgess is just as dissatisfied with the army's handling of his death. On February 22, 2002, he was crushed when an armoured personnel carrier he was commanding suddenly veered off a road near Townsville after an exercise and overturned.

Evidence was presented to the army's own board of inquiry that the vehicle had four faults that gave it defective steering and brakes at the time of the accident. It should have been, in army jargon, "untaskable". A copy of the inquiry report obtained by *The Age* also

revealed that the army mechanics who had performed maintenance on the vehicle were not qualified to work on it, and that records of maintenance on the vehicle had been destroyed.

The board claimed it was unable to determine the exact cause of the accident, but stated categorically that mechanical fault was not to blame, instead suggesting it might have been the fault of the driver, who survived with slight injuries.

They reasoned this was because the vehicle veered to the left in the accident, whereas they claimed if the mechanical faults were to blame it would have veered to the right. But a civilian witness, a MsGraham who was driving up the road at the time of the accident, said she saw the personnel carrier initially veer to the right before veering left and down an embankment.

Jason's mother, Yvonne Sturgess, lives on a property west of Brisbane. She describes the board's findings as a "crock of shit".

"I have begun to think the whole thing was a cover-up. I feel really let down; I don't think they have given adequate explanations of what happened and why. I think the army is incapable of objectively investigating itself because of an internal culture at odds with ordinary civilian standards and values. This was demonstrated when I was approached by a previous commanding officer of Jason's unit. He said: 'Soldiers die, Yvonne; it's part of the job.'

"When a commanding officer accepts death of his charges as an inevitable consequence of (even peacetime) military service, how can we expect him to objectively investigate a critical incident in his command?"

It is this question of the objectivity of investigations which, Evans says, prompted him to instigate the Senate inquiry. But the Government argues that the inquiry is politically motivated.

A spokesman for the Minister Assisting the Defence Minister, Mal Brough, told *The Age* the Government would welcome any recommendations that improved the military justice system, but that he believed the inquiry was used by Evans to air claims about suicides in the military that had nothing to do with justice.

Evans dismisses this. He says there is no doubt that signing up to the defence forces is different to a civilian job, "but it doesn't mean that being prepared to defend your country means you have no human rights or access to civil standards of justice".

He says the argument was always advanced that the services were different because of the discipline needed when forces went into battle. But he says this does not mean the circumstances surrounding people killed or killing themselves in the forces in peacetime should not be transparent.

Evans says a recurrent criticism of military justice was that the officers investigating incidents had a vested interest in the outcomes of inquiries because they were part of the chain of command. He says one of the submissions to the inquiry called for the establishment of a military division of the Supreme Court. This would allow civilian judges

to decide on matters of military law.

"At present people feel there is too much secrecy in the way military justice is handled. Transparency and accountability do not mean the battle commanders will be undermined," Evans says.

While they wait for a resolution, the Satatas family find themselves agonising over fragments of clues. For example, before his death, John had mentioned being racially abused by an instructor. But on the night before his death, he had spoken to his younger brother, Richard, sounding in good spirits and asking that his soccer boots be sent to him for a multi-code inter-services match they thought was in Townsville.

The family also recall he was excited after being sounded out by a senior officer for a possible role in army intelligence because of his fluency in Portuguese. "He just didn't sound like someone who was about to kill himself," says Richard.

The Satatas family believe they have found conflicting evidence in some statements to police and what could be collusion in others. On the two occasions they have been allowed to visit the spot where John was supposed to have died, they were shown two different trees where he was supposed to have attached the rope.

All this led them to the disturbing conclusion the death could have been linked to bastardisation. John had told them before his death that he had been involved in an altercation with a non-commissioned officer who had used the terms "Spic" and "Wog" to address him in a training exercise. The family has engaged the legal firm of Slater and Gordon.

After the death, the army told the family that they were a military family now and would be looked after. Not unexpectedly, the army offered to pay all costs associated with John's funeral and burial.

The final indignity arrived not long after their son and brother was laid to rest: a \$1300 bill from the funeral home.

Those needing assistance can reach Suicide Helpline Victoria on 1300 651 251, Lifeline on 131 114 (both 24-hour lines) or Kids Help Line on 1800 551 800.